

Parshat Vayigash:
Re-Meeting Joseph and His Brothers
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Some time ago, I had the opportunity to meet up with an old friend I hadn't seen for many (many) years. On my way, I tried to imagine what she would look like, worried we wouldn't recognize each other after more than two decades. Every person that walked by, I was worried: is that her? But then, she showed up, as usual 5 minutes late, rushing in, with the same movement and energy she held so long ago. Within seconds we were deep in conversation as if no time has passed. Short of some wrinkles and gray we both added, it seemed like nothing much had changed.

I think about this meeting again as we're caught in the midst of the encounter between Joseph and his brothers, because I can't help wonder, did Joseph's brothers really not recognize him? At all?

Yes, I know, it's been 20 years. And Joseph, who has been away since he was 17, grew up, the peach-fuzz face turning to stubble or beard, and his locks shaved. And he's wearing Egyptian clothing and possibly make-up. And he has a new name. And was "out of context". But was he, really? After all, if anyone should have been at least suspicious, it's the brothers who last saw him, sold to a convoy going down to Egypt, the next-door neighboring country, less than a 7 days walking journey! And, both Yishmaelites and Midyanites were involved in the transaction (Bereishit 37:27-29), relatives of their own grandfather's (half) brother, who were parts of caravans traveling often, carrying, not only goods, merchandise and potential servants, but also news. And then, between this whole exchange, this beautiful, brilliant, unique, wonderchild just vanishes? And, when rumors reach them about a great wise new leader, right in Egypt; one who saves the whole region from a horrible famine by "interpreting dreams", they, who are themselves heir to this way of life of prophecy and spirituality, don't for a minute have even the slightest, tiniest suspicion that it's their long-lost brother?

Joseph on his end knows who the ten Hebrew men are immediately when they enter Egypt, as we read last week (Bereishit 42:7):

When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to procure food."

וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־אֶחָיו וַיִּכְרֶם וַיִּתְנַכֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם
וַיְדַבֵּר אִתָּם קָשׁוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֵאֵין
בָּאתֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְשִׁבְר־אֶכְלִ:

Commentators suggest he was waiting for them. Or Hachayim (18th century, Morocco) writes on Genesis 42:6:

And Joseph was the ruler of the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land:

וַיֹּסֵף הוּא הַשְּׁלִיט עַל־הָאָרֶץ הוּא הַמְּשַׁבֵּיר לְכָל־עַם
הָאָרֶץ

Even though Joseph was the ruler, and it is not usual for the ruler to personally conduct the grain sales, especially when this involved so much effort, he did so himself in order to encounter his brothers eventually (Or Hachayim).

We also know that hard as he tried, he didn't forget his family back home, even naming his son after his painful departure and his desire to forget, which ironically meant, he never did (Bereishit 41:51):

Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, meaning, "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home."

*נִקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־שֵׁם הַבְּכוֹר מְנַשֶּׁה כִּי־נָשַׁנִּי
אֶל־לֵהִימ אֶת־כָּל־עַמְלִי נָאֵת כָּל־בֵּית אָבִי:*

But how about the brothers?

Judah's plea is one of the most moving speeches in the whole Bible. We're touched by his commitment to his father, his stepping up to take care of the family where his three older brothers failed, and by his sincere effort at teshuva (repentance). At the same time, Judah's eloquence clouds our ability to check his facts so we don't notice the inaccuracies and mismatched details between the speech and reality. For example, Judah says (Bereishit 44:19):

My lord asked his servants, 'Have you a father or another brother?'

אֲדֹנִי שָׁאַל אֶת־עֲבָדָיו לֵאמֹר הֲיֵשֶׁלְכֶם אָב אוֹ־אָח:

But, Joseph, when he previously spoke to the brothers, never asked this question.(Genesis 42:13-20).

Judah also inserts a detail about Jacob which Joseph doesn't know, and therefore can't ask, that his father is not only still alive but is still pained over his absence and never lost hope to see him again (Bereishit 44:28-29):

*But one is gone from me, and I said: Alas, he was torn by a beast!
And I have not seen him until now.*

*עַל הָאֶחָד מֵאֲחֵי נֹאמֵר אֶךְ טָרַף טָרֵף וְלֹא
רָאִיתִיו עַד־הַנֵּה:*

Here, Judah talks about the missing brother as someone who was "torn by a beast" although just earlier he said he died (Bereishit 44:20), expressing their possibly true confusion.

But more important, this is a direct response to Joseph's most dreaded fear: as far as he knows, his father was part of the plot to get rid of him, by sending him to check on the brothers in a faraway field, knowing full well that the brothers hated him and might harm him. Was Jacob actually trying to get rid of him? This is the first time he learns that his father is actually heartbroken, continuously longing to see him again.

Reading it so, Judah's speech is constructed carefully so that if the person in front of him is not Joseph, none of those details would mean anything to a stranger; but if he is Joseph, then the message of care, remorse, love and hope would come across. Only then Joseph "can't hold it back", asking all to leave as he reveals himself.

The Book of Bereishit is full of complicated sibling rivalries, and yet, here we find the beginning of hope for a long awaited reconciliation.



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